Ice, Vert
and a Who

by Capt. Jason Schuette

After more than two years in the mystical fleet, I think the following incident is the scariest one I've ever experienced, and that includes KC-135s at night in IMC conditions.

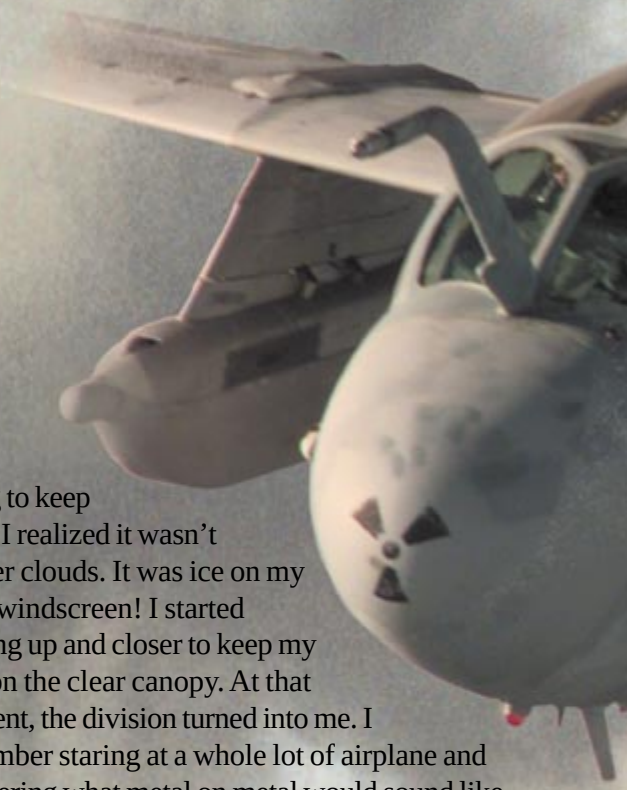
We were returning as a four-ship from a Yuma, Ariz., detachment. I was Dash last. The first half of the flight was uneventful, given the fact that we were tanking off of a KC-10, and the weather was clear. Our goal was to be overhead Cherry Point, N.C., during daylight to fly the division into the break.

With about an hour remaining, Dash 2 developed oil-pressure problems, which made him a bit nervous. However, he decided to press, because the engine rpm was staying within limits.

We had taken off on time, but the winds along the way were not favorable, hard to believe, heading east. Consequently, it was going to get darker than anticipated. Also, although the forecast weather into Cherry Point was VMC, as we got closer, it appeared we would have to penetrate some thick cloud cover to reach VMC. ATIS was calling the field clear. I assumed we were going to press for the overhead, but I didn't say anything.

Then the fun began. It started getting dark. As a division, we had to make an IMC penetration to VMC, and we had a weak jet in the formation. Why not get separate clearances while we were above the clouds VMC? Although not as cool, it would make life easier and control a few risks. "Oh, well," I thought, "we'll see."

As predicted, once we started to descend, the weather became a significant factor. We spent what seemed an eternity in the clouds as Approach vectored us around at 11,000 feet. We were balanced, which put me on the left side of the formation—not the favored position of Prowler pilots. When my section lead's lights began to fade, I figured it was thicker clouds. As I moved closer, trying to keep sight, I realized it wasn't thicker clouds. It was ice on my front windscreen! I started moving up and closer to keep my lead on the clear canopy. At that moment, the division turned into me. I remember staring at a whole lot of airplane and wondering what metal on metal would sound like.



The clouds were reported scattered at 9,000 feet and below, yet not once did the lead try to get us into the clear. However, he did begin to see the futility of the situation and decided to split up the formation to land as individuals. We first got rid of our lame bird. Then the rest of us peeled off, still in the goo. The rest of the flight was uneventful, except for my vertigo, which eventually dissipated.

What did I learn from that experience? At many points leading up to my scariest moment, a link in the chain could have been broken. Anyone, myself included, could have recommended splitting up the flight, which, in retrospect, was clearly the preferred method. I could have called "lost sight"

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Prowler photo by Senior Airman Greg L. Davis
Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton

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and made a play for the clear air below; that would have been a last-ditch maneuver. Either way, it would have made my situation safer.

Because of the perception that our lead was not one of the best when it came to constructive debriefing, we never discussed this flight, which is another reason why I'm writing this article. It wasn't the first time I had flown into IMC conditions in a division. Without a proper debrief to consider all points of view, the learning points were not discussed, thus paving the way for it to happen again.

OPNAVINST 3710 doesn't prohibit flying divisions into IMC conditions; however, I don't know of any lead who would do such a thing unless it was absolutely necessary for accomplishing a mission. It sure hadn't been during the flight I just described.

I wondered for a long time if this story would be worth revisiting and sending in to *Approach*. The lesson is simple, but the fact that it happened more than once means it could happen again.

Capt. Schuette flies with VMAQ-4.